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International Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities

The United Nations General Assembly in New York City adopted the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ICRPD) on December 13, 2006. The overarching goal of this international treaty is to promote and protect the human rights, dignity, and freedom of disabled people around the world. The result of many years of negotiation, the ICRPD was crafted by a diverse coalition of non-governmental, international and local organizations and by dedicated individuals around the world.

A quarter century after the INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF DISABLED PERSONS (1981), the rise of group-specific international human rights treaties, such as those for women and children, extended to include people with disabilities. Passed in record time, especially due to the persistence of disability activists and advocates in many countries, the Convention was the first human rights treaty adopted in the twenty-first century. The Convention, by influencing national constituencies, aims to raise awareness about disability as it insists on the reduction of discriminatory practices and stigmatization that have limited the participation and contributions of people with disabilities throughout history. Consequently, it emphasizes the importance of physical and communicative accessibility, educational participation and inclusion as well as self-determination and EMPLOYMENT opportunities.

The signatory countries agree to act to secure the human rights of disabled people, a group to which, at any given time, around 10 percent of humanity belongs. In many parts of the world, enhanced life expectancies have led to increases in the disabled population, but an estimated four-fifths of persons with disabilities live in

developing countries where they count among the most disadvantaged. The Convention is particularly significant because only a minority of the world's countries had anti-discrimination or other disability-specific laws when it was endorsed. Yet even in those countries where such laws have been enacted, the struggle to realize social justice and inclusion continues.

The ICRPD achieved the highest number of signatories ever to a UN convention on its opening day, March 30, 2007. Once the Convention is signed by countries and ratified, it will serve as a testament of the global consensus that all people need support to develop their full potential. Ideally, it will also be a constant reminder of the contribution each of us can make to reduce the attitudinal and environmental barriers that lead to disablement in the first place.

Further Reading:

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International Symbol of Access

(with Liat Ben-Moshe)

The International Symbol of Access (ISA), when integrated into signage, is meant to designate spaces and facilities made accessible to persons who otherwise would face barriers to their mobility. Since 1969, when this symbol was chosen and defined as the ISA, it has become ubiquitous throughout the world. Attempting to communicate issues of physical access, the (wheelchair) mobility symbol—and related access symbols for vision, hearing, and information—have become among the most widely recognized disability representations. In addition to encounters with disabled individuals themselves, these symbols provide daily interactions with the issues of accessibility and disability.

By the late 1960s, a variety of symbols and signs had begun to designate building constructions that eliminated physical barriers, largely in North America and Europe. Sensing the confusion caused by many different symbols, Rehabilitation

International (RI) initiated a process to establish an international symbol that could be applied consistently worldwide. The aim was to replace many local designs with an authorized international standard recognizable to travelers. In 1968, the International Committee on Technical Aids (ICTA) of Rehabilitation International collected several symbols in use and hosted a global design competition to gather innovative proposals. In the same year, the U.S. Congress passed the groundbreaking Architectural Barriers Act, which required facilities designed, built, altered, or leased with federal funds to be accessible. All symbols submitted to RI were graphic representations of wheelchairs or wheelchair users, indicating that access for this group was paramount. It also reaffirmed the use of wheelchairs as archetypes of disability per se, not only related to mobility. The designs were reviewed by a nine-person jury of disabled and nondisabled representatives from various international organizations in the fields of architecture, design, and disability advocacy.

The ISA functions to communicate accessibility in the built environment, to indicate the presence of accommodations, such as elevators, and to designate who may legitimately use particular spaces, such as widened parking spaces near entrances or enlarged restrooms. The key function is to assist persons in finding their way to and within such spaces. Yet recognition, awareness, boundary drawing, and identity formation also result from the symbol's myriad applications. Indeed, innumerable disability groups and providers of services and products integrate variations of the symbol into their logotypes and marketing to symbolize disability and accessibility. Thus, the symbol's influence and implementation extend far beyond modifications to the built environment.

Whether taken-for-granted, modified, or critiqued, the current ISA has spread around the globe, where it exists virtually as well as materially on doors, throughout buildings, and on the streets leading to them. In sum, the ISA can now be found wherever people move in physical space, needing to navigate barriers and find their way.

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Related Terms:

REHABILITATION INTERNATIONAL

International Year of Disabled Persons (1981)

Not only was 1981 the United Nations' *International Year of Disabled Persons* (IYDP), but the following period 1983-1992 was proclaimed the *UN Decade of Disabled Persons*, emphasizing the need for increased awareness of and commitment to address the living conditions of people with disabilities worldwide. The Year's key goal was to affirm and implement the principle "full participation and equality" contained in the UN General Assembly's 1975 *Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons*. Disabled people should participate fully in communities, self-identify their needs, and share in their societies' socio-economic development. However, continued social and political action, advocacy, and awareness-raising is needed everywhere to more completely realize these goals.

Like other American social movements, of women, ethnic and racial minorities, and gays and lesbians, people with disabilities and deaf people have been especially successfully after the Second World War in their struggles to have policymakers and politicians recognize their human rights. Particularly important for many activists and advocates engaged in the disability and independent living movements, the IYDP garnered considerable publicity. Governments initiated diverse activities within the IYPD's framework, from convening conferences to issuing special postage stamps, all increasing public awareness of disability issues. Many representatives of national disability rights and independent living movements as well as leaders in the international disability movement refer to the year as their entry point. Over time, 1981 has come to symbolize the paradigm shift from deficits and charity to civil rights, accessibility, and participation. While often noted as a critical juncture in disability history, a catalog of 1981's direct impact and indirect influence awaits further scholarly attention.

Originally named paternalistically International Year *for* Disabled Persons, but changed upon the request of Frank Bowe (U.S. Representative for the Year and a member of the deaf community), the proposal within the United Nations to designate an international year about disability was introduced by Mansur Kikhia, Libyan Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN in 1976. Growing within the UN, the action plan for the year included among its many tenets the following: to bring the *World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons* to finalization, to encourage coordination and cooperation among governments and nongovernmental

organizations in activities relating to disabled people, and to transfer technology and know-how as well as support technical co-operation activities in developing countries relating to disabled people, especially in the areas of prevention of disability, in rehabilitation, and in societal integration.

In the United States, 1981 provided a time of stock-taking for the disability movement, after signal legal victories in architectural access and public schooling. Since 1998, December 3 each year has been the *International Day of Disabled Persons* to carry on the tradition of awareness raising and to rally support for equality. Recognizing the distance still to go, the *UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons* (2006), emphasizes that meeting many priorities identified a quarter century earlier—from basic physical accessibility through educational access to self-empowerment and self-supporting employment—continues to challenge societies worldwide.

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Related Terms:

AWARENESS; CONVENTION ON RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES (2006); UNITED NATIONS

Learning Disability

Learning disability is so prevalent a concept that it has become difficult to imagine a world without it, especially given the centrality of schooling in contemporary society. However, the history of learning disability (LD) clearly shows that it need not have developed as it has. In fact, school systems in many countries know no such category. In America, the development of LD is inseparable from the dramatic expansion of compulsory schooling and intelligence testing since the beginning of the twentieth century. Begun as part of the military's attempts to measure recruits' intelligence during World War I, psychometric testing has since become routine in education, training, and employment. Hotly debated, these statistical and psychological approaches to measuring IQ redefined who was considered "normal" and "abnormal" – based on the normal distribution of intelligence along the Bell or Gauss curve. While "NORMALCY" is a common word, its derivation from mathematical methods of differentiating people by their characteristics (performance on tests, for example) is less well known. Early on, the EUGENICS movement abused IQ tests as arguments for the genetic "inferiority" or "superiority" of particular ability groups, classes or races. Despite repeated criticism of these tests' validity and reliability, they were used to justify policies that limited births and immigration, segregated people in asylums, and led to forcible sterilizations. Revised for widespread use in schools, psychometric tests promoted the development of school "tracking" systems that separate students into ability groups according to their scores.

The specific term learning disability was defined by psychologist Samuel Kirk in his 1962 book Educating Exceptional Children. A year later, the term was adopted by a group of parents for their organization, the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, now known as the Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA). Within a few years, advocates of legislation succeeded in having the Children with Specific Learning Disabilities Act of 1969 passed, which started specific pilot projects to serve students with learning disabilities. Then as now, there is no consensus on what learning disability as a concept is or what types of school programs best respond to children and youth so identified. In the United States, around twelve percent of all students participate in SPECIAL EDUCATION. And approximately half of those

students have been classified as having one of myriad "specific learning disabilities." This is an umbrella term for a broad array of difficulties in acquiring and applying information. As with other "special educational needs," learning disabilities refer to judgments that teachers, scientists, and policymakers have made about who should receive additional or specialized resources to access the curriculum. In this case, evaluations of school performance and information processing result in particular learning differences being recognized as deserving of attention. Given the key role of school performance in determining young adults' further educational and career options, standards set in schooling are increasing – and increasingly contested. The controversial No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 sets specific national standards, requires states to devise accountability systems to monitor schools' progress toward achievement standards, and penalizes schools for not meeting these standards. While focused on helping the most disadvantaged groups, such as students with learning disabilities, by including them in evaluations, considerable differences between states indicate continued difficulties in assuming responsibility for vulnerable student groups.

A major dilemma is that the official definition of learning disability is much narrower than it appears at first glance. In 1975, a "discrepancy" measure for LD was codified in national law in the precursor to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This is still the primary, though not exclusive, criterion for determining eligibility. It requires that children be diagnosed as having a "severe discrepancy" between intellectual ability (shown by IQ test results) and school achievement (usually evaluated with standardized tests and grades) in such areas as basic reading skills or math reasoning. Thus, this definition requires a diagnosis of "underachievement," which is usually described "objectively" as the consequence of neurological dysfunction and processing deficits within the individual student. However, such evaluations depend on subjective expectations for "normal" learning performance and progress held in particular times and places.

Alternatives to the focus on deficits include highlighting strengths, acknowledging multiple intelligences, and questioning the impact of cultural values, social structures, and schooling conditions on provided learning opportunities, past and present. Indeed, distinct perspectives on the phenomena of learning disability in different scientific fields and among educators emphasize the concept's complexity. The challenge of making sense of it continues. Not only are too many diverse conditions

subsumed in a single category, but also researchers across the sciences face the daunting task of more adequately analyzing the impact of multifaceted interactions between environmental factors and genetic predispositions on information processing, such as reading, writing, or calculating. In practice, the challenge remains to develop appropriate instruction and treatment interventions. While SPECIAL EDUCATION provides resources to facilitate learning and emphasizes remediation and compensation as key goals, such programs have often led to stigmatization, lowered expectations, and group discrimination when they label and separate students. Among the negative consequences of institutionalized boundaries between students with differing abilities are incentives to separate pupils and the redirection of resources without accountability or research needed to evaluate program efficacy and equity.

Research shows considerable spatial disparities in identification and treatment that underscore the influence of environmental factors on classification, such as rules and regulations, organizational differentiation, and professional training. But contextual, biological, and cognitive theories and empirical results must be charted together to produce a more easily applicable model whose relevance for school practice can be conveyed. Scientific fads, special interests, and ideological positions have battered the LD field. Yet as disability studies scholars regularly point out, we already do have sufficient knowledge to identify and remove many of the structural and attitudinal barriers that inhibit students' ability to learn. As those involved in schooling and parenting grapple with the specific and heterogeneous needs of students perceived as having learning disabilities, we must continuously ask ourselves which skills, intelligences, and abilities we prioritize and why.

The definition of learning disability in America exemplifies an individualistic, standards-based approach to learning and schooling. However, as indicated above, it is neither the only possible definition nor the most useful one. The group of children classified as having LD has continuously increased. Unfortunately, individualizing responsibility for learning success and failure masks the structural conditions that determine how many and what kinds of learning opportunities schools are able to provide. Due to the routine use of standardized testing in the United States, the contingent character of concepts such as LD is forgotten. But if full inclusion is a democratic goal that Americans wish to realize, we must encourage dialogue about our expectations for children's learning and for schools charged with educating future generations.

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Related Terms:

EUGENICS; NORMALCY; SPECIAL EDUCATION

Rehabilitation International

Founded by Edgar F. Allen in 1922 in Elyria, Ohio as *The International Society for Crippled Children*, today *Rehabilitation International* (RI) is a global network promoting and implementing the rights, inclusion and rehabilitation of people with disabilities. From the beginning, the organization dedicated itself to assist disabled people, doing so by providing direct services, by disseminating information, and by influencing political decisionmaking. Uniquely, it has been a cross-disability, cross-disciplinary, and international organization from the start. Further, in its first decade as in its eighth, conceiving and publicizing bills of rights were a key feature of the organization's mission.

In its first decades, the International Society enjoyed close contact with Rotary International, winning renowned speakers such as FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT for its world congresses, and gave birth to several other organizations, including the immensely successful EASTER SEALS SOCIETY. After the Second World War, the organization reestablished its international linkages, moved to New York and shifted from being a voluntary to a professionally-run organization with broadened thematic focus and well-connected to the nascent United Nations. Another offspring of the International Society is the World Rehabilitation Fund (1955), a pioneer in developing rehabilitation programs worldwide.

As ever, the organization promotes social change towards the inclusion and rehabilitation of people with disabilities around the world. It does so through its extensive network of member organizations in 90 countries. RI commissions and partnerships actively pursue those strategic goals by collaborating with international, national, regional, and local organizations. RI representatives regularly participate in summits as well as in planning meetings preparing policy statements or international charters. The federation facilitates international communication and cooperation and

advocates for policies and legislation that recognize and support the rights of people with disabilities and their families, whether the establishment of a "Crippled Child's Bill of Rights" back in 1931 or support for the "UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" seventy-five years later.

A democratic organization governed by the assembly of members, RI has regional leadership in Africa, the Arab region, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America. RI sustains thematic commissions to develop program activities in particular fields of expertise, such as the International Commission on Technology and Accessibility (ICTA), which was instrumental in creating the INTERNATIONAL SYMBOL OF ACCESS in 1968, signifying RI's support for barrier-free design. Besides implementing its own programs such as awareness-raising campaigns, RI provides training and technical assistance to governments, professionals, and disabled persons; holds congresses on disability-related topics; publishes periodicals on disability issues; and distributes information and audio-visual materials used in public education and training worldwide.

Reflecting the transition from charity to disability rights, RI is among the oldest organizations that represents people with disabilities, promotes the provision of services, and strengthens human rights around the world.

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Related Terms:

EASTER SEALS SOCIETY; FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT;
INTERNATIONAL SYMBOL OF ACCESS